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A Story in Fragments: An Analysis of Poetry and Perspective in *October Mourning*

On Tuesday, October 6, 1998, Matthew Shepard, a gay 21-year-old student, was lured out of a bar by two men, beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die. The story of his murder endures to this day, a symbol of the horrors of hatred and homophobia. Eleven years after Matthew's death, author Lesléa Newman created *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard,* a collection of poetry chronicling the murder through a host of different perspectives affiliated with the act, including inanimate objects, affected community members, LGBTQ+ allies, and perpetrators of homophobic violence. Newman felt a personal connection to Matthew's story, as she was scheduled to speak at his college during the University of Wyoming's Gay Awareness Week a mere week after the murder took place, and she wrote *October Mourning* to tell "[her] side of the story" (Newman xi). However, the narrative's format, which stitches together diverse poems and viewpoints through common themes and symbolism, offers the reader a more complete picture of the incident than just a single woman's reaction. Newman demonstrates how the use of poetry and perspective shifts in children's and young adult texts allows an author to explore multiple facets of an issue, creating a more holistic representation of an individual's experiences without appropriating these experiences.

Newman's credibility as a lesbian author and her personal connection to the incident provide her the ethos to illustrate different voices and points of view in a non-judgmental, non-appropriative fashion. Newman has authored numerous children's books addressing LGBTQ+

topics, including *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), the first picture book to openly address a lesbian relationship in a positive fashion. Her success as an author who can effectively address these topics with younger audiences establishes her as a logical narrator to Matthew's story, and her credibility and sensitivity are furthered by her identification as a member of the impacted group. In an interview with the *Huffington Post* about writing *October Mourning*, Newman stated:

> "I imagined Matt Shepard, whose picture had been splashed all over the newspapers, sitting in the front row for my speech. I knew he had planned on coming to my lecture...To this day, I open all my speeches on LGBT rights by honoring Matt's memory... Though I never met Matt, he has become an important part of my life."

Her personal connection with Matthew inspires and qualifies Newman to write his story as she interprets it, which showcases dozens of unique perspectives in order to relay the story Matthew never got the opportunity to tell for himself. Newman never attempts to speak for her characters; she instead provides the reader with different lenses through which to view the incident, created by the shifting point of view between involved parties, and the changing poetic forms.

This collection grapples with the detriment of pervasive intolerance within society, demonstrating that "Homophobia… is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal" (Swartz 11). Newman's honest discussion with young readers highlights the paramount necessity of childhood education to combat fear and ignorance. However, the mere inclusion of literature for children which features gay families is not enough to promote acceptance within communities. Melissa Schieble argues that "Adding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) literature to the curriculum as a tool to combat homophobia, without addressing the ways that heterosexuality is constructed as normal, does little to redress unequal power relations

and privileges associated with sexual orientation and gender identity." To truly communicate themes of tolerance and acceptance with children, one must then provide children with the tools to see acts of injustice through multiple lenses, to relate to these retellings, and to speak honestly about them, as Newman does in *October Mourning*.

The poetic structure Newman employs in *October Mourning* is well suited to exploring the many individual stories surrounding Matthew's death in a way that appeals to youth readers. Scholars Tarr and Flynn assert that "No one needs a reminder of how prevalent poetry is in children's lives, ranging from nursery rhymes to advertisement jingles to song lyrics to poetry in the classroom." Poetry's prevalence can be attributed to its success in supporting young readers in the understanding and identification of emotions surrounding an issue; it provides children accessible access to social emotional learning concepts. Karen Coats argues that "poetry helps connect a child's body experiences with linguistic expression" (*Bloomsbury* 117) because the format "appeal[s] to one's senses and intellect" (116). Poetic language, meter, and metaphor all elicit emotion in readers while simultaneously functioning as tools that help strengthen young readers' social emotional literacy skills. Readers with a higher social emotional comprehension demonstrate greater understanding of emotional expression, can relate their feelings to concrete vocabulary words, and decode the emotions and actions of those around them. Poetry is essential then in the expression of thoughts and feelings and the cultivation of emotionally healthy and aware children.

In Coats's article "The Meaning of Children's Poetry," she asserts that "The rhythms and sounds of poetry for children, whose metrics, phonetics, and structures resonate with bodily architecture and processes, preserve the body in language, while its metaphors, which are almost always rooted in sensual experience, help us understand who we are as subjects and objects in a

world of signs.” Connecting child readers to poetic vocabulary permits children to find relationships between their emotional experiences and language. As children mature, poetry then becomes a method to shift “outward experience to inner experience” (Coats 128). The highly emotional and perspective driven nature of Newman’s poetry provides children a place to relate to the work and see themselves as impacted by it. Newman therefore uses her collection for multiple purposes: as an outlet to vent her own feelings, a memorial to honor Matthew's legacy, and a space for young readers to reconcile what is going on in the world with what is happening inside themselves.

Coats suggests that "the verse novel offers a different way to tell one's story, and to recognize it as a story with underlying themes and concerns that connect across its various fragments" (134). *October Mourning* demonstrates such a fragmented structure, both in its temporal separation into sections (e.g., “Before” and “After” the incident), and its relegation of a specific perspective to each poem. Newman’s collection interprets the viewpoints of parties involved in or impacted by Matthew’s murder—the drag queen, the biker, the mother, the murderer, the natural world, to name a few—giving each individual a dedicated poem to showcase only a fragment of the narrative. She then weaves these pieces together with the common themes present across all pieces. Upon publication, critiques of the poem acknowledged that "Newman deploys a wide range of poetic forms...but all share jagged rhythms and a biting sense of grief and helplessness" (Gross). Themes of grief, fear, love, loss, and hate permeate this collection, unifying a diversity of perspectives and opinions into descriptors of a single event.

The symbol of the fence where Matthew was tied and left for dead, which reappears in several poems and serves as an anthropomorphized narrative voice for four poems in the collection, stands as an example of how a singular point of view can elucidate the poem’s

unifying themes, creating a more holistic picture of the event. The fence first appears as the subject and narrator in the opening poem, "THE FENCE *(before).”* The poem visually alerts the reader to the presence of a future disruptive event with its separation into two distinct sections, the second identifiable by the use of italics. This change in format causes a visual break in the calm, undisrupted description in the first half of the poem, in which the fence sits "Out and alone/ on the endless, empty prairie" (Newman xv, 1-2). Rhetorical questions posed by the fence in the second half of the poem, such as "will I always be out here/ exposed and alone?" (9-10) and "will anyone remember me/ after I'm gone?" (15-16) then shift the poem to a more uncertain, hesitant tone. With this change, Newman establishes a starting perspective and state for the fence "before" the incident and demonstrates a shift to a fearful, anxious state of being. The rhetorical questions asked by the fence towards the finale of the poem can even be posed as questions applicable to Matthew during his time at the fence, foreshadowing the incident for the reader before it occurs. The poem structure allows the fence narrator to demonstrate a chilling insight into how traumatic events can shape landmarks after they occur and how a singular point of view can resonate with overarching questions in a story.

The fence perspective returns three more times throughout the collection; the reader last encounters it in, "THE FENCE *(after)*." To begin this poem, Newman includes a quote from the *New York Times* regarding the fence after the incident: "*The fence has been torn down*" (82). With this statement, Newman informs readers of the fate of the fence, while also alluding to the ways that Matthew's death maintained a worldwide impact. The fence becomes a metaphor, an intangible entity after it too passes, a symbol of a disregarded wall of silence surrounding issues of anti-gay hate. As the fence is dismantled, a metaphorical one is also demolished, giving society room to grow from the tragedy of Matthew's death. The fence becomes here a more

holistic representation of the event's legacy, aiding the reader in their understanding of multiple point of views through which to consider this crime. The fence motif is just one of many that permeate this collection, but it demonstrates how the exploration of different perspectives relative to a single issue is integral to quality discussion and understanding of a central theme.

Another notable perspective in *October Mourning* is the voice of the biker who found Matthew at the fence the morning after the crime. The biker's poem describes his arrival to the "forsaken fence" (14), where he mistakes Matthew for a "scarecrow" (12), unable to believe that a human shape could be disregarded in this way. This description of a "forsaken" fence supports the perspective of the fence itself before the incident, who identifies as "exposed and alone" (xv). These two poems illustrate themes of loneliness and abandonment permeating the fence setting, providing a backdrop for the incident to take place. The biker's description of Matthew as a scarecrow— actually quoted from cyclist Aaron Kreifels who discovered Matthew the morning after the incident, and a common symbol seen to describe Matthew's body in creative works, such as Melissa Etheridge's memorial song "Scarecrow"— also characterizes Matthew in relation to the incident. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "scarecrow" as "something... that frightens or is intended to frighten," nonexclusive to crows in a field. Relating Matthew's form to a scarecrow suggests that his defiled personage is the product of something incredibly fearful: a terrible, unspeakable act. Newman uses these images for readers to understand the horror that hate can give rise to. "THE BIKER"'s imagery creates something fearful in the pits of readers' stomachs, hinting towards the disruptive event that "THE FENCE (*before*)" foreshadows.

The fearful mood of this poem is heightened through the use of extensive Halloween imagery, setting the scene in early October by describing folks "getting/ spooky" (3-4), and decorating for the holiday. Sprinkling these images throughout the poem provides an

otherworldly, eerie quality to the piece. Newman wants to center her reader in a world where frightful creatures can exist, where unbelievable things can happen. When the biker realizes that Matthew is not a scarecrow, he describes his figure as the "smashed shattered/ pumpkin of a boy" (15-16). Pumpkin faces are fragile, caricatures and interpretations of human and animal facial traits. This comparison provides the reader an image of Matthew as robbed of his humanity, transformed into an eerie semblance of the person he once was. All of the threads between Matthew's murder and Halloween symbolism demonstrate the palpable fear associated with this crime, specifically the fear of the unknown. Halloween can be scary for children because of the presence of masked figures and unexplainable magic, unexpected tricks and strange treats, all unknown and potentially dangerous components of the holiday. Fear also manifests in minds governed by hate and ignorance, causing individuals to become othered, unexplainable, and unknown. When a person becomes the "other," just like the masked figure on Halloween doorsteps, the person loses their humanity. Newman allows the reader to configure this parallel, demonstrating how fear of the unknown impacts a community. Fear invests children in a story, thrills them into learning the details, but it also causes individuals to act in horrific ways and influences community response to horrific events.

Newman shares perspectives of the event's impact on the community, specifically the LGBTQ+ community, in poems such as "THE DRAG QUEEN," which also includes themes like vulnerability and fear, connecting it into other perspectives in the narrative. The poem describes the drag queen character, a hypothetical perspective created by Newman, who feels forced back "into the closet" after hearing about Matthew's death. The poem is wrought with fear, beginning with Newman's inclusion of Carla Brown's quote, "If I were a homosexual in Laramie [after Matthew's death], I would hang low, very low" (Newman 54). This sentiment shows the reader

the real threat of another similar hate crime occurring in the community, uniting LGBTQ+ identifying individuals through fear of retaliation. An uneasy, regrettable mood overtakes the piece from this point on, as the drag queen lists the ways in which their life henceforth will change (Newman 54, 1-12):

> The minute it happened/ my silver sequin slingbacks/ slid back/ into the closet/ The minute it happened/ my glittery gold gowns/ slipped back/ into the closet/ The minute it happened/ my fluffy feather boas/ slithered back/ into the closet

The flashy, proud, performative actions of wearing "glittery gold gowns" or "fluffy feather boas" become vulnerable and conscious experiences. Use of words like "slithering" demonstrates to the reader how the drag queen may feel ashamed to share this part of themselves with the world, knowing that it could have such serious ramifications. Experiences where the character is exposed and vulnerable, just as the fence who sits out and alone on the prairie, become too risky.

Through the poem's format, the reader visually understands how the drag queen's life is disrupted by returning to the closet. The poem follows a strict four-lined stanza structure, until the final lines of the poem. "The minute it happened/ I dragged my sorry ass/ back/ into the closet/ slapped the door shut/ and swallowed the key" (17-22). These two final ideas-- "slapped the door shut/ and swallowed the key"-- hang without a stanza, breaking up the poem's visual layout and consistent alliteration. Just as Newman employs visual formatting to illustrate disruption in an accepted pattern in "THE FENCE (*before*)," she also employs the technique here. The ideas dangling at the poem's end provides the reader with an unsatisfactory ending to the drag queen's story. It is insinuated that the drag queen has been robbed of their ability to tell their story or express themselves; they have swallowed the key to their closet, leaving no room

for escape. This ending mirrors the way in which Matthew's death robs him from sharing his story with the world. Newman acts as a proxy for both characters, storytelling where they cannot.

Each poem in this collection functions as a different perspective, a unique retelling of Matthew's story. Newman's poetry beautifully showcases the multitude of characters— inanimate, present, and hypothetical— impacted by the death of one individual. The inclusion of so many perspectives is a method to tell the stories of those passed on in an aware and sensitive way. Newman's retellings of Matthew's story are the words of many, not fabricated language meant to represent Matthew's thoughts and feelings. Her creation of the collection serves to honor his memory and tell the story he did not have the chance to tell, but through the way that it affected *her.* Blending so many perspectives surrounding this moment instead of writing from one point of view mitigates room for bias in her writing. Newman shows young adult readers the importance of considering all individual sides by crafting a full picture of fear, grief, and love within a community. She ensures that each retelling, each point of view is its own facet of Matthew's impact, but she also provides insight to how each singular perspective elucidates the collection's unifying themes. It is unfair to question if her story is accurate to Matthew's reality. Stories shift and evolve each time they are told and then again each time they are accepted into the minds of readers. Newman's collection is authentic to her own emotions surrounding Matthew Shepard, and she delivers the poems with every effort to educate a new generation of readers against the dangers of hate and power of tolerance, as well as celebrate the legacy Matthew left behind.

Matthew's story illustrates how a singular moment born of hate can challenge and change a community. In the pages of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard,* Newman delivers an in-depth exploration of Matthew's death for young readers through the use of poetry,

perspective, and point of view. She does not attempt to speak for Matthew, but rather writes his story through her own eyes, her own experiences. Newman endeavors to tell the whole story, albeit the version that she is familiar with, and her effort keeps her story relatable to readers and does not appropriate Matthew's thoughts and words. As scholars Ott and Aoki suggest, “Shepard [was] the center of the story. This was not, and never would become, a story about hate crimes in which Matthew Shepard was simply an example. It was a story about Shepard, in which hate was the motive for violence.” Newman's portrayal of Matthew's story in verse creates for readers a bridge towards understanding the impact of a life on a community and their history. Her poetry revives a voice extinguished by hate, who otherwise would have no medium in which to be heard.

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